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horti CULTURE

for the home gardener

LILACS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Common or Eastern lilacs (Syringa vulgaris) are flowering shrubs that bring nostalgic remembrances to many transplanted Southern Californians. Anyone familiar with the Eastern or Northern States in spring is always impressed by their huge flowering bouquets. A major cultural problem with growing these lovely shrubs in our California climate is our warm winters. Lilacs thrive and bloom best in winters that are freezing. This very fact that lilacs need a much longer period of dormancy than our climate usually allows has made them difficult to grow here in the past. There is, however, a strain of lilacs developed at Descanso Gardens especially for the warm winter climate of Southern California. This strain needs much less winter chilling than most other Eastern lilacs. Syringa vulgaris 'Lavender Lady' or Lavender Lady Lilac is one of the oldest varieties of this strain available at many local nurseries. It produces some of the largest and best flowers that are available. Newer varieties, available on a more limited basis, have flowers that are in many shades of white, pink, purple, or lavender. The ideal time to purchase your lilac is when it is in bloom so you can pick the exact color you want. Some of the varieties that are available are: White Chiffon, Spring in Descanso, Mrs. Forrest K. Smith, Descanso Giant, Sylvan Beauty, Pride of the Guild, and King of Descanso.

Some special care is required to get the biggest and most abundant flowers from the plant. Lilacs need full sun all day long in order for them to flower and look their best. After September 15, water should not be applied to the plant except for natural rainfall. For this reason, it is imperative that the lilac be planted away from lawns or plants that will need watering after this date. Watering should resume when the leaf and flower buds start to open in the early spring. The reason for withholding the water is to force the plant to go dormant. Plants that don't go dormant will bloom early and will give you only small, poorly formed flowers of little beauty spaced out through the winter and spring seasons.

When planting your lilac, dig a hole twice as big as the root ball. Mix in ½-part soil and ½-part planter mix, or other organic material to be put back into the hole, so the soil level on the plant will be level with the surrounding soil level. Fill in around the plant with the same kind of soil mixture. One exception to this method is if you are planting a grafted plant. Ask your nurseryman when you purchase your lilac if it is a grafted plant or a plant grown from a cutting. Grafted plants should be planted with the graft union below the surface of the soil. This will mean digging a little bit deeper and burying the root ball and some of the plant stem. Since lilacs are grafted on the privet rootstock, you will have to watch for and remove any privet suckers that may sprout from the root area. Lilac suckers should be permitted to grow.

In January make a generous basin about 2 to 3 feet in diameter around your plant and add a 3-inch mulch of well-rotted manure. Add ½ cup of 16-4-4 fertilizer to the basin for a four foot bush. Keep this mixture pulled back a few inches from the plant stems. Water the plants deeply whenever the soil is dry to a depth of 2 inches.

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When your lilac blooms in the spring it will reward you with masses of lovely, fragrant flowers. You can cut these flowers for enjoyment in your home and at the same time prune and shape the plant. The cut flowers will last longer if you crush the woody base of the stems for a distance of about 2 inches and then put them in a container of lukewarm water.

If you prefer to leave the flowers on the plant, be sure to remove all faded flowers and any seed pods as they form. If seed pods are left on the plant, it will cause your next year's bloom to be scarce and scanty.

By giving your lilacs just a little extra care and attention you too can enjoy all the nostalga that lilacs conjure up for thousands of people in the south-land.

Additional information can be obtained at:
Los Angeles State and County Arboretum - 681-5277,
Descanso Gardens - 790-5571,
South Coast Botanic Garden - 772-5813.